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“A Boot Stamping on a Human Face – For Ever”: George Orwell, Language, Literature, and Politics

Abstract: Britain experienced the harshness of 20th-century dictatorship and censorship only obliquely, as a reflection of what was happening in several “elsewheres”. Yet, events such as the Spanish Civil War deeply affected a whole generation of young British writers who, after the period of elitist Modernism, were trying to reassert the political import of literature through a redefinition of the role of the artist as politically and socially *engagé*. George Orwell figures as one of the most disenchanted and lucid witnesses of this particular historical moment. In both his essays and journalistic articles, as well as in his narrative work, he continuously ponders over the relationship between political power and society on the one hand, and language and literature on the other, providing a most interesting analysis of the mechanisms that preside over this interaction.

Keywords: George Orwell; Language; Literature; Politics; Totalitarianism; Propaganda; *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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Differently from other European countries, Britain experienced the harshness of 20th-century dictatorship and censorship only obliquely, as a reflection of what was happening in several “elsewheres”, from Italy to Spain, from Germany to the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, events such as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) deeply affected a whole generation of young British writers who, after the period of elitist Modernism, were trying to reassert the political import of literature through a redefinition of the role of the artist as politically and socially *engagé*. Within this framework, George Orwell figures as one of the most disenchanted witnesses of this particular historical moment. In a series of essays and journalistic articles published between the late 1930s and his premature death, which occurred in 1950, Orwell carried on a lucid reflection on the close relationship between political power and society on the one hand, and language and literature on the other, providing a most interesting analysis of the mechanisms that preside over this interaction. Whereas in his nonfiction he predictably addressed the issue from a more objective standpoint, his

narrative later transfigured the widespread fears connected with dictatorship and censorship into the threatening anti-utopia of *Animal Farm* (1945) and the dystopian landscapes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where the worst nightmares concerning thought and language control and intellectual annihilation become true. This essay will first focus on Orwell's essayistic pronouncements on literature and politics, and eventually turn to consider how his late fiction reflected his lifelong concern with such essential issues as man's freedom of speech and action in contemporary mass society.

George Orwell, born Eric Blair, belongs to the so-called "Generation of the Thirties", writers whose careers began in the 1930s and whose works were socially and politically engaged. Coming after the great Modernists of the beginning of the century (Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Woolf), they felt the need to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, whose elitist and highly aesthetic idea of literature they could no longer share. Faced with a thoroughly changed and steadily changing historical reality, with totalitarianisms of different sorts spreading all over Europe, Orwell and his contemporaries – Isherwood, Auden, Spender, MacNeice among others – felt the need to somehow respond to the political context in their works¹.

It is within this new framework that, for instance, Isherwood's notorious dismissal of Virginia Woolf's literature took place: in *Christopher and His Kind*, he recounted an episode that occurred in Berlin in 1931, when he had been to see Pabst's *Kameradschaft* with Spender and "when the tunnel caved in and the miners were trapped, he had thought: 'That makes

Virginia Woolf look pretty silly"². For his part, Orwell repeatedly emphasised the cultural watershed dividing his own generation from the Modernists. In one of his most famous essays, "Inside the Whale", published in 1940, he wrote:

But quite suddenly, in the years 1930-5, something happens. The literary climate changes. A new group of writers, Auden and Spender and the rest of them, has made its appearance, and although technically these writers owe something to their predecessors, their 'tendency' is entirely different. Suddenly we have got out of the twilight of the gods into a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing. The typical literary man ceases to be a cultured expatriate with a leaning towards the Church, and becomes an eager-minded schoolboy with a leaning towards Communism. If the keynote of the writers of the 'twenties is 'tragic sense of Life', the keynote of the new writers is 'serious purpose' [...]. In other words, 'purpose' has come back, the younger writers have 'gone into politics'³.

He came back to this idea the following year, in a talk broadcast by the BBC Overseas Service on 30th April 1941, whose title was "The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda":

The writers who have come up since 1930 have been living in a world in which not only one's life but one's whole scheme of values is constantly menaced. In such circumstances detachment is not possible. You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a

disease you are dying from; you cannot feel dispassionately about a man who is about to cut your throat. In a world in which Fascism and Socialism were fighting one another, any thinking person had to take sides, and his feelings had to find their way not only into his writing but into his judgements on literature. Literature had to become political, because anything else would have entailed mental dishonesty. One's attachments and hatreds were too near the surface of consciousness to be ignored. What books were *about* seemed so urgently important that the way they were written seemed almost insignificant⁴.

Both as a critic and as a creative writer, Orwell himself embodied an idea of the intellectual as politically and socially engaged, an individual who, in Edward Said's definition, plays

a specific public role in society [...] someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously⁵.

On the one hand, since he began to be seriously involved in literary criticism

– that is from the early 1940s – his starting point was invariably, as Graham Good maintains, “the political beliefs of the writer” which he always related “to his generation and class”⁶. Hence, his literary criticism was based on the “[c]onsideration of these three ideological aspects – political, historical, and social”⁷.

On the other hand, when it came to describing his own activity as a writer, he consistently admitted: “Every line of serious work I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism”⁸. This statement is taken from a fundamental essay entitled “Why I Write”, published in 1946, a poetic manifesto but also, at the same time, a sort of “portrait of the should-be contemporary artist”. Historical events, especially war (first the Spanish Civil War, then the Second World War) definitely determined his choices as a writer, as Sonia Orwell effectively puts it: “War made him a political activist [...] a journalist, pamphleteer and polemicist”⁹. The political purpose of writing is described in “Why I Write” as the “[d]esire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society they should strive after”¹⁰. Orwell clearly states that he writes “because there is some lie that I want to expose”¹¹. This strong commitment is closely related to the idea that if writers give up this desire to influence, their works are bound to become mere artificial decorative objects. This is not to say – and Orwell repeatedly stresses this point – that being political necessarily implies that the writer should dismiss the idea of art as an aesthetic experience; on the contrary, Orwell asserts his inclination to “feel strongly about prose style”¹², and is

convinced that the two urges – the political and the aesthetic – may not only coexist, but also effectively interact¹³. Looking back through his work, Orwell sees that where he lacked a political purpose, he wrote lifeless books full of “purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally”¹⁴. On the contrary, “the more one is conscious of one’s political bias”, Orwell affirms, “the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one’s aesthetic and intellectual integrity”¹⁵.

The writer’s intellectual integrity is another polar point in Orwell’s reflection on the relationship between literature and politics. He was thoroughly convinced of the necessity of the writers’ independence, of their freedom from the influence, for instance, of political parties, and of the possibility for them to take an objective stance on reality in order to be able to describe it. As a matter of fact, being a political writer in Orwell’s sense was far from becoming a mere spokesman of some political party and/or ideology: it rather entailed what he called “the historical impulse”, the “desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity”¹⁶. In this sense, the Orwellian writer turns into a sort of historian, whose work becomes fundamental for memory and for handing the legacy of the past down to future generations.

However, in the Great Britain of his times Orwell found a generation of writers – his own generation – whose political attitude he could not ultimately share, since they had turned to, in some cases they had totally devoted themselves to, Russian Communism, which Orwell considered “a form of Socialism that makes mental

honesty impossible”¹⁷. They had done so, he maintains, because:

it was simply something to believe in. Here was a church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline. Here was a Fatherland and – at any rate since 1935 or thereabouts – a Führer. All the loyalties and superstitions that the intellect had seemingly banished could come rushing back under the thinnest of disguises. Patriotism, religion, empire, military glory – all in one word, Russia. Father, king, leader, hero, saviour – all in one word, Stalin. God – Stalin. The devil – Hitler. Heaven – Moscow. Hell – Berlin. All the gaps were filled up¹⁸.

This infatuation of British intelligentsia with Russian Communism was possible, according to Orwell, because of “the softness and security of life in England”, that is thanks to the fact that:

the overwhelming majority of English people have no experience of violence or illegality. If you have grown up in that sort of atmosphere it is not at all easy to imagine what a despotic regime is like. Nearly all the dominant writers of the ’thirties belonged to the soft-boiled emancipated middle class and were too young to have effective memories of the Great War. To people of that kind such things as purges, secret police, summary executions, imprisonment without trial, etc. etc. are too remote to be terrifying. They can swallow totalitarianism because they have no experience of anything except liberalism¹⁹.

Hence, before the War, criticising the Soviet regime from the left had been severely reprimanded because such a criticism, no matter whether it was based on truth or not, sounded inconvenient and was said to play “into the hands of this or that reactionary interest”²⁰. As a consequence, the literary and journalistic output of that period appeared strongly polarised with, on the one hand, Conservative anti-Russian literature, which Orwell described as “manifestly dishonest, out of date and actuated by sordid motives”, and, on the other, an “equally dishonest stream of pro-Russian propaganda”²¹. Afterwards, during the Second World War, the alliance between Russia and Great Britain had even worsened the situation by enforcing a “general tacit agreement”²² which implied that unseemly facts or burning issues concerning the Soviet Union should be neither discussed nor even mentioned to avoid undermining general political consensus.

The risk Orwell glimpsed in this cultural panorama is acutely analysed in a 1945 essay entitled “Freedom of the Press”, intended as a Preface to his anti-utopian fable, *Animal Farm*, which had been rejected by several publishers for its overt anti-Soviet content²³. In this Preface, Orwell argues that the indisputable absence of any official censorship or state control over literature and journalism in Britain from the 1930s through the Second World War and after it, was actually – and dangerously from his point of view – counterbalanced by the presence of what he called a “voluntary” censorship based on widely shared public opinions and on a coward attitude towards these very same opinions on the part of writers. Orwell overtly blames the literary intelligentsia of his times:

If the intellectual liberty which without a doubt has been one of the distinguishing marks of western civilisation means anything at all, it means that everyone shall have the right to say and to print what he believes to be the truth, provided only that it does not harm the rest of the community in some quite unmistakable way. Both capitalist democracy and the western versions of Socialism have till recently taken that principle for granted. Our Government, as I have already pointed out, still makes some show of respecting it. The ordinary people in the street – partly, perhaps, because they are not sufficiently interested in ideas to be intolerant about them – still vaguely hold that ‘I suppose everyone’s got a right to their own opinion’. It is only, or at any rate it is chiefly, the literary and scientific intelligentsia, the very people who ought to be the guardians of liberty, who are beginning to despise it, in theory as well as in practice²⁴.

What Orwell could simply not tolerate was the generalised lack of intellectual honesty and integrity, which he always deemed essential to literature and to the writer as an individual and as a citizen. His insistence on “mental honesty” patently adds an ethical dimension to his reflection on the relationship between literature on the one hand, and politics and society on the other, an ethical import that becomes even more evident when Orwell deals with the crucial topic of language, of its use and its manipulation.

Undoubtedly, his most interesting pronouncement on this point is to be

found in “Politics and the English Language”, first published in *Horizon* in April 1946 and later re-printed in the collection *Modern British Writing*²⁵. The essay provides an most lucid analysis intended to highlight the contemporary deterioration of the English language by the hand of a class of politicians who speciously employ it for mere propagandistic purposes²⁶. As Berel Lang suggests, Orwell was convinced that language

reflects what is going on [...] in the politics and culture of the society more generally. Language, in other words, is a mirror of society and of history, displaying in its own organization the events and relations that otherwise affect more openly the lives of its users²⁷.

Consequently, since he considers the civilisation of his times as decadent, “language [...] must inevitably share in the general collapse”²⁸. At the same time, Orwell also firmly believes that the degeneration and impoverishment of language run the serious risk of causing, in their turn, a degeneration of thought, thus establishing a vicious circle which may turn out to be utterly dangerous for society as a whole:

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a

failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts²⁹.

However, this process, Orwell explains, is reversible, so that if one succeeds in getting rid of the bad habits modern English is full of, “one can think more clearly, and to think clearly”, he argues, “is a necessary first step towards political regeneration”³⁰.

According to our author, present-day English shows a strong tendency towards abstraction, which implies a dangerous distancing from the visible and the concrete that was typical, for instance, of Biblical language. Lack of precision, staleness of imagery, together with a tendency to use ready-made phrases and pretentious diction, make contemporary prose high-resounding but often meaningless, witnessing a treacherous tendency to mystification and concealment. Hence, the special connexion between politics and the debasement of language, a key issue in Orwell’s thought: the language of politics – be it in pamphlets, manifestos, speeches, or leading articles – is mainly based on mechanically repeated familiar phrases and, what is even more pernicious, this kind of artificial language is mainly used for

the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed

be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*³¹.

Such an insincere and manipulative use of language is typical of totalitarian regimes, whose power is rooted in a strict thought control that inevitably implies language control and, as a consequence, linguistic degeneration. On this specific point Orwell convincingly asserts:

When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics'. All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When the general atmosphere

is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find [...] that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship³².

It comes as no surprise, then, that in the age of totalitarianism, literature also undergoes a process of drastic decline. Where the State controls not only the actions of its subjects, but also their thoughts and emotions, literature is bound to disappear, at least in the guise one has so far known it, that is, as the expression of individual thoughts and feelings, the result of a creative impulse:

I suggest that if totalitarianism triumphs throughout the world, literature, as we have known it, is at an end. And, in fact, totalitarianism does seem to have had that effect so far. In Italy literature has been crippled, and in Germany it seems almost to have ceased. The most characteristic activity of the Nazis is burning books. And even in Russia the literary renaissance we once expected has not happened, and the most promising Russian writers show a marked tendency to commit suicide or disappear into prison³³.

Orwell's is a sort of "call to arms" of all those intellectuals who care for literature and recognise its import at both the personal and the public level:

Whoever feels the value of literature, whoever sees the central part it plays in the development of human history, must also see the life and death necessity of resisting totalitarianism,

whether it is imposed on us from without or from within³⁴.

Orwell's long essayistic reflection on the relationship between political power, language, and literature eventually found an effective fictional transposition in his late narrative work, namely in *Animal Farm* (1945) and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). As far as his anti-utopian fable is concerned, it was written "during the Second World War, at a time when London was being bombed by the Nazis and Churchill's Britain was an official friend of Stalin's Russia"³⁵. Nevertheless, Orwell conceived it as a harsh criticism of Soviet totalitarianism, "a damning indictment of contemporary Bolshevism"³⁶, to which he also added an arraignment of the most disputable aspects of capitalism³⁷. The well-known story of the farm animals that rebel against their human oppressor and establish a new society, theoretically founded on the principle of equality but actually answering the needs and ambitions of a new class of rulers, the pigs, succeeds in effectively allegorising the dynamics and dangers of totalitarian *regimes*, showing the crucial role played by propaganda in them. In *Animal Farm* Squealer, "a small fat pig [...] with very round cheeks, twinkling eyes, nimble movements, and a shrill voice"³⁸, is designated as the pigs' mouthpiece and, as such, he skilfully spreads their propaganda among the other animals:

He was a brilliant talker, and when he was arguing some difficult point he had a way of skipping from side to side and whisking his tail which was somehow very persuasive. The others

said of Squealer that he could turn black into white³⁹.

Interestingly enough, political propaganda seems to benefit from a specific "body language" Squealer skilfully performs: as a consequence, his skipping side to side with a whisking of the tail becomes part of a sort of propitiating ritual that will frequently accompany his public speeches⁴⁰. Squealer's task is to "set the animals' minds at rest"⁴¹ by convincing them of the goodness of Animalism and the pigs' rule, which he often does by means of euphemistic rhetoric. When they start complaining about the shortage of food, for instance, he deftly asserts that:

A too rigid equality in rations [...] would have been contrary to the principles of Animalism. In any case he [Squealer] had no difficulty in proving to the other animals that they were NOT in reality short of food, whatever the appearances might be. For the time being, certainly, it had been found necessary to make a readjustment of rations (*Squealer always spoke of it as a 'readjustment', never as a 'reduction'*), but in comparison with the days of Jones, the improvement was enormous⁴².

Essential to Squealer's propaganda is also its systematic revision of the past, whose contours are promptly redrawn in order to suit the ever-changing needs of the ruling class. Hence, he often contradicts the animals' memories by either persuading them that they are at fault, or by blaming various enemies (another fickle and indeed shifting role in the

story) for surreptitious insinuations and misinformation.

If in *Animal Farm* these concerns, though imperative and unequivocally expressed, are somewhat toned down by the transfiguring effect of the animal allegory, in Orwell's next novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the choice of an uncompromising, at times even disturbing, realism allows the author to provide his readers with the "strongest and most memorable metaphors of the relation between despotism and language"⁴³. Set in what was at the time a not too distant future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* notoriously depicts a world divided into three inter-continental superpowers – Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia – that are constantly at war with one other. Air Strip One, that is England, is now part of Oceania and is ruled by a totalitarian regime that keeps each individual under strict control⁴⁴, systematically manipulating the past so that it may fit the ever changing versions of history Ingsoc, the all-powerful Party, expects citizens to believe. The protagonist, Winston Smith, is meant to represent "the last man in Europe – the last person who thought or felt or cared as a human being"⁴⁵. Winston works for the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, his job consisting in either destroying or "rectifying" articles and news-items in newspapers:

Winston examined the four slips of paper which he had unrolled. Each contained a message of only one or two lines, in the abbreviated jargon [...] which was used in the Ministry for internal purposes. They ran:
times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify

times 19.12.83 forecasts 3 yp 4th quarter 83 misprints verify current issue
times 14.2.84 miniplenty malquoted chocolate rectify
times 3.12.83 reporting bb dayorder doubleplusungood refs unpersons rewrite fullwise upsub antefiling [...]. Winston dialled 'back numbers' on the telescreen and called for the appropriate issue of *The Times*, which slid out of the pneumatic tube after only a few minutes' delay. The messages he had received referred to articles or news-items which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify. For example, it appeared from *The Times* of the seventeenth of March that Big Brother, in his speech of the previous day, had predicted that the South Indian front would remain quiet but that a Eurasian offensive would shortly be launched in North Africa. As it happened, the Eurasian Higher Command had launched its offensive in South India and left North Africa alone. It was therefore necessary to rewrite a paragraph of Big Brother's speech, in such a way as to make him predict the thing that had actually happened⁴⁶.

The only site in which truth is still likely to intermittently glimpse is individual consciousness – "Nothing was your own except for few cubic centimetres inside your skull"⁴⁷ – and this is the reason why the State, embodied by "the black-moustachio's face"⁴⁸ of Big Brother, carefully sees to it that all dissident thoughts, significantly stigmatised as "thoughtcrime", be totally eradicated and resistance brutally crushed.

In this systematic annihilation of individual endeavour, a pivotal role is played by language. As Jean-Jacques Courtine puts it, in the nightmarish world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “power must [...] become master of language” because

language is the living memory of man and offers him a space for inner resistance. Language constitutes a screen between the totalitarian gaze and the human body, it offers the shelter of its shadow, it veils the harsh light needed to read bodies. Language threatens the totalitarian enterprise. It is in fact the zone of obscurity where the gaze is lost. People must therefore be cured of their language: old and obscure terms must be eliminated, areas that escape definition, and zones of indeterminacy-ambiguity, equivocation, polysemy wiped out⁴⁹.

From the linguistic point of view, the world of Oceania is still in a transitional moment, as *Oldspeak*, that is Standard English, has not been totally replaced yet by the new language⁵⁰, *Newspeak*, a highly innovative jargon purposely devised to support the dictatorial project⁵¹. As Syme, a philologist in the Ministry of Truth, explains to Winston, a huge team of experts, “engaged in compiling the Eleventh Edition of the *Newspeak Dictionary*”⁵², will eventually get the language

to its final shape – the shape it’s going to have when nobody speaks anything else. When we’ve finished with it, people like you will have to learn it all over again. You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words.

But not a bit of it! We are destroying words – scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone⁵³.

“Verbicide”, as A. M. Tibbets calls it, unsurprisingly figures as one of the basic principles of this linguistic revision in the Appendix Orwell adds to the novel, entitled “The Principles of *Newspeak*”. Here a deliberate simplification of language is said to promote “an almost complete interchangeability between different parts of speech”⁵⁴, together with a basic regularity of grammar to be achieved by obliterating exceptions and deviations from the norm. Notably, the features of *Newspeak* highlighted in this Appendix, such as the recurrence of euphemisms, or the use of compound words and ready-made phrases, are the very same Orwell pointed to in his essays, identifying them as typical of the political language of his times⁵⁵, which of course strikes a note of ominous warning against all comfortable beliefs in the self-perpetuating nature of democracy. Even more interestingly, the Appendix also points to the purpose of *Newspeak*:

The purpose of *Newspeak* was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc [English Socialism], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when *Newspeak* had been adopted once and for all and *Oldspeak* forgotten, a heretical thought – that is a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its

vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words, and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible, of all secondary meanings whatever⁵⁶.

The passage foregrounds the strict connection between language and thought, highlighting that by changing language – namely by simplifying and impoverishing it – one may actually change mind habits and consequently weaken, if not totally eradicate, independent thought. This is what also Syme patiently illustrates to Winston, when he underlines that, unlike Oldspeak, which is full of “useless shades of meaning”⁵⁷, Newspeak is aimed at

narrow[ing] the range of thought [...]. In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it [...]. The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect. Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak⁵⁸.

In the dystopian world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, literature, intended as the expression of individual creativity, must also predictably undergo the same biased manipulation suffered by language. Alongside with newspapers, films and TV programmes, even plays, novels and lyric

poems are artfully produced by the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth so as to supply the citizens of Oceania with orthodox material for their entertainment and instruction. Within the Party’s “literary project”, a whole section is specifically devised for the proletariat, that is the larger part of the population:

There was a whole chain of separate departments dealing with proletarian literature, music, drama, and entertainment generally. Here were produced rubbish newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime, and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope known as a versificator. There was even a whole sub-section – *Pornosec*, it was called in Newspeak – engaged in producing the lowest kind of pornography, which was sent out in sealed packets and which no Party member, other than those who worked on it, was permitted to look at⁵⁹.

Hence, not only does literary and linguistic impoverishment inevitably entail thought erosion and degradation, but it encourages moral debasement too.

Moreover, the female protagonist of the novel, Julia, Winston’s lover and rebel comrade, is associated with the “writing” activity since she works on the machines of the Fiction Department. Significantly enough, hers is no intellectual job at all:

She enjoyed her work, which consisted chiefly in running and servicing

a powerful but tricky electric motor. She was 'not clever', but was fond of using her hands and felt at home with machinery. She could describe the whole process of composing a novel, from the general directive issued by the Planning Committee down to the final touching-up by the Rewrite Squad. But she was not interested in the finished product. She 'didn't much care for reading', she said. Books were just a commodity that had to be produced, like jam or bootlaces⁶⁰.

Within this context, past literature can hardly aspire to play a role: as a matter of fact, the reader is informed that various authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens, are being or will be translated into Newspeak, which means that they will be destroyed: not "merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be"⁶¹. If, as Syme asserts, "Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think"⁶², true literature must necessarily be obliterated.

In fact, as Claire Hopley argues, Orwell was thoroughly convinced of the role literary tradition could play in unveiling the shortcomings and dangers of the contemporary world: "One reason why Orwell [...] refers to the literature of the past is that he was acutely aware of living in an ailing civilization that seemed to have few resources left. Allusions to great literature can evoke decay by potent contrast"⁶³.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston is perfectly aware of the heterodox revolutionary implication of writing: "To mark the paper was the decisive act"⁶⁴, the narrator points out when, at the beginning

of the book, the protagonist performs his first rebellious action by deciding to keep a journal, to write down his memories and thoughts. He does so by sitting in an alcove in his flat which apparently remains outside the range of the telescreen that constantly monitors his life.

From the spatial point of view, then, writing is clearly envisaged as a sort of oasis of freedom, a place in which Winston can still be human, and which allows him to let his thoughts freely flow. Interestingly enough, he records them in a free direct discourse that is totally mimetic of his stream of consciousness, and where even punctuation is progressively eliminated in order to allow the free manifestation of the mind:

April the 4th. 1984. Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. Audience much amused by shots of a great huge fat man trying to swim away with a helicopter after him, first you saw him wallowing along in the water like a porpoise, then you saw him through the helicopters gun-sights, then he was full of holes and the sea round him turned pink and he sank as suddenly as though the holes had let in the water, audience shouting with laughter when he sank. then you saw a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it. there was a middle-aged woman might have been a jewess sitting up in the bow with a little boy about three years old in her arms. little boy screaming with fright and hiding his head between her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into her and the woman putting her arms round him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself,

all the time covering him up as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him. then the helicopter planted a 20 kilo bomb in among them terrific flash and the boat went all to matchwood. Then there was a wonderful shot of a child's arm going up up up right up into the air a helicopter with a camera in its nose must have followed it up and there was a lot of applause from the party seats but a woman down in the prole part of the house suddenly started kicking up a fuss and shouting they didnt oughter of showed it not in front of kids they didnt it aint right not in front of kids it aint until the police turned her turned her out i dont suppose anything happened to her nobody cares what the proles say typical prole reaction they never⁶⁵.

At the end of the novel, Winston will be bent to orthodoxy by means of physical and psychological torture perpetrated by O'Brien, a member of Thinkpol, the secret branch of Oceania Police devoted to discover and punish thoughtcrime. Unsurprisingly, O'Brien's prophecy for the future of Oceania specifically refers to art and literature:

There will be no love, except of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a

defeated enemy. *There will be no art, no literature, no science.* When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always – do not forget this, Winston – always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever⁶⁶.

Nineteen Eighty-Four takes to its ultimate, nightmarish conclusion a process whose roots Orwell had clearly identified in his own society, and overtly denounced in his essayistic production. The latter constitutes a corpus of writing that, to my view, can still pertinently and authoritatively talk to 21st-century readers, urging them to interrogate themselves about pivotal issues of power, politics, language, and literature, issues that are inescapable in our culture and society, and which must prominently figure in any present discussion on the future of our civilization.

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NOTES

1. Cfr. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, London, The Bodley Head, 1976.
2. Norman Page, *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, p. 148.
3. George Orwell, "Inside the Whale", in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. I: *An Age like This 1920-1940*, Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 510.
4. George Orwell, "The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda", in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. II: *My Country, Right or Left 1941-1943*, Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 126.

5. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures (1994)*, New York, Vintage, 1996, p. 11-12. Orwell would have certainly subscribed also to Norberto Bobbio's definition of the intellectual as "responsible": "importa [...] per che cosa egli [l'intellettuale] s'impegni o non s'impegni, e in quale modo, assumendosi tutte le responsabilità della sua scelta, e delle conseguenze che ne derivano" "what is important [...] is what the intellectual does or does not engage himself in, and how, taking on himself the whole responsibility for this choice, and the consequences that derive from it". Norberto Bobbio, "Presenza della cultura e responsabilità degli intellettuali", in *Il dubbio e la scelta. Intellettuali e potere nella società contemporanea*, Rome, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1993, p. 143, my translation.
6. Graham Good, "Ideology and Personality in Orwell's Criticism", in *College Literature*, no. 11, 1984, p. 81.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
8. George Orwell, "Why I write", in *Collected Essays*, vol. I, p. 5.
9. Sonia Orwell, "Introduction", in *Collected Essays*, vol. I, p. xvi.
10. George Orwell, "Why I write", p. 4.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
13. After Orwell died in 1950, E. M. Forster wrote: "Many critics besides Orwell are fighting for the purity of prose and deriding officialese, but they usually do so in a joking off-hand way, and from the aesthetic stand-point. He is unique in being immensely serious, and in connecting good prose with liberty" (*Listener*, November 2, 1950, cit. in John Rodden and John Rossi, *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 2012, p. 97). Nevertheless, even recent criticism has continued to privilege the study of content over stylistic or formal analysis. See, among others, Stephen Ingle, *The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell: A Reassessment*, London, Routledge, 2006; Craig L. Carr, *Orwell, Politics, and Power*, London & New York, Continuum, 2010; Ian Williams, *Political and Cultural Perceptions of George Orwell: British and American Views*, New York, Palgrave, 2017; John Newsinger, *Hope Lies in the Proles: George Orwell and the Left*, London, Pluto Press, 2018; David Dwan, *Liberty, Equality, and Humbug: Orwell's Political Ideals*, Oxford, O.U.P., 2018.
14. George Orwell, "Why I write", p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. George Orwell, "Inside the Whale", p. 514.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 515-516.
20. George Orwell, "The Freedom of the Press", in *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 September 1972. This essay was intended by Orwell as a Preface to the first edition of *Animal Farm*, but it was never included. Ian Angus later found the typescript, which was published in 1972 with an introduction by Bernard Crick. Retrievable at <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/AnimalFarm/english/efpgo> (last accessed 20/06/2019).
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. "While at the BBC Orwell began to compose *Animal Farm*, whose aim (as he later explained in the preface to the Ukrainian translation) was to 'destroy the myth that Russia is a socialist country'. Completed in late 1944, it was rejected by more than two dozen publishers in Britain and the US (including by T. S. Eliot at Faber)" (John Rodden and John Rossi, *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell*, p. 93).
24. George Orwell, "The Freedom of the Press", http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Animal_Farm/english/efp_go
25. Denys Val Baker (ed.), *Modern British Writing*, London, Vanguard Press, 1947.
26. A lucid analysis of Orwell's essay tracing his "moral tension" back to Victorian thought, in particular to John Ruskin, is provided by Michela Marroni in "George Orwell e la difesa della lingua inglese: suggestioni e tracce ruskiniane in 'Politics and the English Language'", in *Anglistica Pisana*, no. 11, 2014, p. 179-191.

27. Berel Lang, "1984: Newspeak, Technology, and The Death of Language", in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, no. 72, 1989, p. 170-171.
28. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV: *In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950*, Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, London, Secker & Warburg, 1968, p. 127.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 127-128.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
33. George Orwell, "Literature and Totalitarianism", in *Collected Essays*, vol. II, p. 134.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
35. George Orwell, *Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Edited by A.M. Heath, with an Introduction by Christopher Hitchens, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003, p. viii.
36. David Dwan, "Orwell's Paradox: Equality in *Animal Farm*", in *ELH*, no. 79, 2012, p. 655.
37. See Paul Kirschner, "The Dual Purpose of *Animal Farm*", in *The Review of English Studies*, no. 55, 2004, p. 765-766.
38. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, p. 15-16.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
40. See *ibidem*, Chapter III, p.33; Chapter V, p.52; Chapter VII, p.69; Chapter VIII, p.90; Chapter IX, p.106.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 95, my stresses.
43. A.M. Tibbetts, "What Did Orwell Think about the English Language?", in *College Composition and Communication*, no. 29, 1978, p. 165.
44. The telescreens through which citizens are continually monitored bear strong resemblances to Bentham's *Panopticon*. As Courtine points out, "The effects are the same in both cases: 'To be constantly under the eyes of an inspector', explains Bentham, 'it to lose the power to do evil and almost the thought to wish it'. People will be docile, for their own good" (Jean-Jacques Courtine, "A Brave New Language: Orwell's Invention of *Newspeak* in 1984", in *SubStance*, no. 15, 1986, p. 72-73).
45. Berel Lang, "1984: Newspeak, Technology, and The Death of Language", p. 169. Notably, *The Last Man in Europe* was the original title Orwell had chosen for his novel, which the publisher objected to, eventually deciding to call it *1984*.
46. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, p. 34-35.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
49. Jean-Jacques Courtine, "A Brave New Language: Orwell's Invention of *Newspeak* in 1984", p. 70.
50. "It was expected that Newspeak would have finally superseded Oldspeak (or Standard English, as we should call it) by about the year 2050". George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 241.
51. According to Jean-Jacques Courtine, *Newspeak* appears as "a satire of both *cablese* and *Basic English*. *Cablese* is a sort of verbal shorthand, used by journalists to dispatch their messages, which operates on the principle of systematic truncation and condensation of words [...]. *Basic English* is an international language experiment imagined by C. K. Ogden. It falls into the category of *minimal languages*, that is, of international languages derived from a natural language by a massive reduction of its lexical stock and by the elimination of its main syntactical or morphological difficulties. It is a syntactically simplified English of 850 words [...] corresponding to the linguistic competence of a six-year-old child" (Jean-Jacques Courtine, "A Brave New Language...", p. 71-72).
52. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 42.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
55. Harold J. Harris has argued that "the essay served his creative work in much the same way that notebooks served more self-consciously literary artists like James and Hawthorne. In his essays can

be found many of the raw materials which were later to be reworked – or in some cases carried over without real reworking – into the fictive world Orwell called *1984*". Harold J. Harris, "Orwell's Essays and *1984*", in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, no. 4, 1959, p. 154.

56. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 241.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 45-46.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

63. Claire Hopley, "Orwell's Language of Waste Land and Trench", in *College Literature*, no. 11, 1984, p. 61.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 215, my emphases.